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"She's Me": An Exploration of Pet Ownership from the Perspective of People Who Are Homeless

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Keywords: homelessness, companion, well-being, pets, bond

Abstract: For many people who experience homelessness, having a pet is an important part of their lives. Although the benefit and meaning of pet ownership has been well recognized in the literature, few studies have explored its meaning from the perspectives of individuals who are homeless. This qualitative study explored the meaning of pet ownership from the perspectives of three men who previously or currently owned a pet while experiencing homelessness. In line with the chosen methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), semi-structured, in-depth interviews explored the phenomena of pet ownership. This paper is based on one of three themes from the research: *human-animal bond*. Findings within this theme suggest that pet ownership is a valued activity, with participants demonstrating reference to the emotional support the animals provided. Participants highlighted the reliable nature of their pets in comparison to the breakdown of previous human relationships and described the relationships as being formed out of mutual respect. Language used throughout the interviews reflected the perceived family bond participants had with their pets. From this research it is evident that pet ownership may enhance emotional well-being and also provide an important relationship for individuals experiencing homelessness. Therefore there is merit in homelessness service providers developing strategies and policies to enable persons accessing their services to keep their pets close by.

Introduction

Homelessness is a multifaceted and dynamic social phenomenon that exists in many forms (Elwell-Sutton et al., 2016). People who are homeless may live in hostels, housing projects, squats, sleep rough,

or sofa surf (Homeless Link, 2016). Quantifying the number of people who experience homelessness is challenging because of the transient and hidden nature of this population (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). A recent study, collecting data from homeless accommodation providers and day centers in England,

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identified that just under 36,000 individuals received housing-related support between October 2015 and January 2016 (Homeless Link, 2016).

The negative impact of prolonged homelessness on the physical and mental health and well-being of individuals is well documented in the literature (Foster et al., 2010; Johnstone et al., 2016; Levitt et al., 2009). Being without a home and using homeless services can have a significant influence on a person's identity, roles, self-esteem, and motivation (Karabanow, 2008; Marshall & Rosenberg, 2014). Yet for many people who are homeless, having a pet is an important and valued activity. Although there are currently no statistics available within the UK, research conducted in the United States estimates pet owners as 10% of the total homeless population, with this figure as high as 24% in some areas of the country (Pets of the Homeless, 2017). Unfortunately, for many individuals becoming homeless can result in the loss of a pet. Findings from Slatter, Lloyd, and King (2012) highlighted factors such as eviction, the inability to care for an animal on the street, and the difficulties of meeting council regulations contributed to the guilt in having to let their pet go.

A constant component of Western civilization (Menache, 1998), pet ownership has not only been well recognized as a positive determinant of health and well-being (McConnell et al., 2011; Robinson, 2013; Staats et al., 2008), but also as a valued and meaningful component of everyday living (Allen et al., 2000), involving ongoing responsibility and care (Langfield & James, 2009). The emotional support animals provided was a central theme across studies that directly explored the meaning of pet ownership from the perspective of individuals who were or who had previously experienced homelessness. Rew (2000) evidenced the therapeutic value of pet ownership in relation to companionship. Using both focus groups and individual interviews with 32 homeless youths, findings suggested that the ownership of a pet provided unconditional love, safety, and a reason to keep going in a response to social and emotional isolation. Similar findings were described in a study with homeless women, whose voices are often ignored within homeless research (Dej, 2016). Participants

stated that strong human-animal attachment fulfilled companionship needs, with participants (39%, $n = 20$) stressing the unconditional acceptance that animals provide (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). In a study of homeless youths ($n = 398$), the benefits of companionship and love from animals while homeless outweighed barriers including veterinary care and feeding (Kidd & Kidd, 1994). Within this study, participants completed a set of questions measuring the dimensions of pet ownership and although the statements used were based on previous literature, it did not allow participants to identify any further meaningful components of pet ownership.

The social benefits of pet ownership for people who are homeless is also evident in the literature. A study by Zimolag and Krupa (2009) indicated that dog ownership was believed by homeless individuals to initiate social conversations. Research by Taylor, Williams, and Gray (2004) presented findings representative of the UK population. Its focus was to investigate empathy, attachment, crime, drug use, health, and public opinion rather than allow free exploration of other potential components related to the activity of pet ownership. Using questionnaires completed by homeless individuals ($n = 51$) and members of the public ($n = 90$), findings demonstrated that female members of the public were more inclined to express animal-oriented empathy. Interestingly, protection was only mentioned in one study, with animals providing a sense of safety for the participants (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011).

The challenge of accessing services when homeless with a pet has been highlighted. Taylor, Williams, and Gray (2004) demonstrated a decreased number of homeless individuals accessing health treatment compared to those without a pet. This was associated with the fact that animals were not allowed in health-related facilities and subsequently highlights that the lack of modification to individuals needs can be a substantial deterrent for homeless individuals accessing services (Kidd & Kidd, 1994). Indeed, this also applies to accommodation services for people who are homeless. Despite the many positive psychological and physical benefits of pet ownership (Allen, 2003; Baun & McCabe, 2003; McNicholas

et al., 2005), many homeless services and housing providers often do not accept individuals with pets (Dogs Trust Hope Project, 2007). Concerns regarding behavior and perceived health issues related to animals have been identified as potential barriers for individuals accessing accommodation (Baker, 2001; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Slatter et al., 2012). Furthermore, Howe and Easterbrook (2018) reported that homeless pet owners perceived that their pets limited their access to services.

Overall findings suggest that pet ownership is a valued and meaningful activity for individuals experiencing homelessness. However, evidence is limited and on a small scale (Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice, 2015), and therefore further research is required to explore possible health and well-being correlations when in engaging in such an activity (Headey & Grabka, 2007), especially the health and well-being outcomes of caring for a pet among socially isolated individuals (Zimolag, 2011).

Research Question

The focus of this in-depth qualitative study was to explore the meaning of pet ownership from the perspective of individuals who were or have experienced homelessness. Being reflexive within the research process, the inspiration for this research stemmed from reading a novel on the experiences of a person who described the life-changing impact of befriending a cat (Bowen, 2012).

Methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) was the qualitative research approach employed to investigate pet ownership as a meaningful activity among the homeless. Used to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social world, IPA is concerned with personal perception as opposed to objective statements (Smith & Osborn, 2007). According to Rapport (2005), a core characteristic of the phenomenological

method is a hermeneutic variant. Based on this, IPA considers that lived experiences are only accessible through a process of interpretation by both the participant and the researcher (Smith, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Described as the process of interpretation, a double hermeneutic approach was used by the researcher to analyse the data. The two-layered process involved the researcher trying to make sense of the participant's activity of pet ownership, with the participant equally trying to summarize what pet ownership means to them individually (Smith, 2011).

Focusing on the exploration of the personal and lived experiences of the participants, IPA serves as an effective data gathering tool when conducting qualitative research (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). A purposive sampling technique was employed to facilitate the recruitment of information-rich participants (Emmell, 2013). Participants were identified and recruited based on their ability to offer a meaningful perspective on the phenomenon of interest (pet ownership and homelessness) (Carpenter, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Plymouth, Faculty of Health & Human Sciences, Health Student Ethics Committee and consent was gained from the Strategic Manager of the homeless service prior to commencing this research. Access to relevant participants was facilitated via a gatekeeper in the homeless organization in the Southwest of the United Kingdom. This is a commonly used recruitment method in purposeful sampling to overcome problems associated with concealed populations (Creswell, 2014). The gatekeeper approached potential participants and initially discussed the aims of the study and what was involved with the research. At this stage an information sheet and consent form were provided. The knowledge of the gatekeeper meant the protection of vulnerable individuals and that recruitment met the stipulations listed in the inclusion/exclusion criteria of the project. Individuals invited to participate in the study were over 18 years old, had experienced homelessness within the last 10 years, and were previous or current pet owners while homeless. Individuals also required the capacity to provide informed written consent. As

involvement in the study was voluntary, participants were made aware that they were able to withdraw their participation until the point of data analysis (Medical Research Council, 2015).

The key authors of IPA recommend between three and six participants in line with the researcher's aims and experience of the methodology (Smith et al., 2009). Four individuals were approached by the gatekeeper in line with the inclusion criteria, all of whom registered interest in participating in the study. On the morning of the scheduled interview, one participant decided not to participate and withdrew his interest, therefore there were three participants in total. A pilot interview was completed for clarity on language use and comprehension of the questions (Creswell, 2008). Semistructured interviews were conducted, guided around a set of open-ended questions used with each participant. Such face-to-face interaction was deemed important when depth of meaning was being explored (Gillham, 2000). Equally, such flexibility during interviews provided greater sensitivity to the interviewees when discussing emotive topics (Flick, 2015). Reflective notes were completed by the researcher within 24 hours after each interview.

Drawing on the seminal text on IPA, the researcher decided to follow the six-stage step-by-step guide provided by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009): (a) reading and rereading, (b) initial noting, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case, (f) looking for patterns across cases. Before starting, the researcher transferred the transcripts into individual tables with three columns to support the process of analysis. The columns were headed with the following titles in line with the six-stage process: emergent themes, original transcript, and initial/exploratory comments.

The researcher utilized three quality strategies while completing the research. Information was stored in a logical and understandable way to create an effective audit trail (Carcary, 2009). In the provision of transparency reflexive commentaries were also used throughout the study to demonstrate the researcher's beliefs, values, and particular biases

related to the research topic (Tracy, 2010). The researcher also spent time digesting the IPA quality evaluation guide (Smith, 2011) to ensure the theoretical principles of IPA were clearly applied when completing the research.

Findings

Quotations incorporated throughout the findings section are used in conjunction with participant pseudonyms and corresponding page numbers listed from the original individual analyzed scripts. In line with IPA, the analysis below is not purely descriptive, but also provides interpretation by the researcher (Smith, 2004). In order to provide individual context to the findings, a brief synopsis of each participant has been outlined in Table 1 and demographic information is listed in Table 2.

This research led to the development of three master themes: *human-animal bond* (encompassing the unique bond people had with their pets), *pet ownership as a prioritized occupation* (emphasizing the importance of pet ownership as a meaningful activity), and *societal understanding* (understanding of both the public and homeless services in relation to the unique perspective of dog ownership by individuals who are homeless). Each was evident to a smaller or larger extent in each of the three participant interviews. This paper explores the overarching theme *human-animal bond* to allow for in-depth discussion within the limits of one paper with plans to address the two further themes in further publications.

Master Theme: Human-Animal Bond

Human-animal bond encompasses the unique bond participants had with their pet. Their use of language was a key indicator that supported the creation of this master theme and was particularly pertinent in responses provided by two out of three individuals interviewed. This master theme evolved from four superordinate themes, based on analysis across all three individual cases (see Figure 1).

Table 1 Synopsis of each participant.

Jim	
<p>Jim was a quiet and reserved man who had given up his time to be interviewed during his working day. He had previously accessed services at the homeless association and while a resident he accumulated skills that allowed him to work in the kitchen after finding independent accommodation. Jim had moved across country to the local area to be closer to a previous partner. In response to a news advert requesting the adoption of dogs from a local animal shelter, Jim visited and had chosen his pet dog, a puppy at the time, because he had a “funny” habit. Jim owned his dog before moving across country and continued his pet ownership while categorized as homeless and living on the streets. Jim described his dog as “lovely” and said that he enjoyed walking him in the park. Sadly, while Jim was accessing services, his dog was found to have an incurable illness. Jim was supported in accessing his local veterinary charity by the homeless service, but tragically his dog had to be euthanized.</p>	
Elliott	
<p>Elliott was a very flamboyant, extroverted character. Elliott had previously accessed support from the homeless services while categorized as homeless, and at times was asked to leave due to inappropriate behavior. Before completing the session Elliott became extremely suspicious of the process and required reassurance from the researcher to confirm it was not police related. Elliott had had dogs and many other animals while growing up and longed for a dog of his own. His current dog was given to him as a gift by a former girlfriend. Following their split, Elliott continued to look after and care for the dog independently. After a brief custodial sentence, Elliott became homeless and required support from the homeless association. During this time he was supported by friends who looked after his dog. Elliott now lives independently in a rented flat with his dog. Although happy to talk about his experiences of pet ownership, Elliott did become emotional during the interview when discussing times of separation from his pet dog. At Elliott’s request, his dog was present during the interview in line with consent from the homeless association.</p>	
Tom	
<p>Tom was very shy at the start of the interview, stating himself that he felt down that morning. However, once he began to start to talk about his pet dog he became very animated and seemed to enjoy conversing about the subject. Tom stated that a marriage breakdown had been the cause of his being categorized as homeless and needing to access homeless services. Prior to experiencing homelessness, Tom mentioned, he had owned different dogs throughout his life, but one of the main reasons he decided to own a dog was due to a planned health-related procedure. He believed owning a dog would get him “out and about,” and at the time of the interview he had owned his dog for 7 years, ever since it was 6 months old. Tom found his dog tied up to a lamppost. Tom had very strong opinions around his perceived role of being a “pet owner” and described in detail his “mate-like” relationship with his dog. Tom also detailed a period of 4 days when he temporarily lost his dog and felt “completely lost” during that time. At the time of the interview Tom and his pet dog were living in a private room, which was provided by the homeless association. During the interview Tom’s dog was present as he did not like to leave her on her own.</p>	

Table 2 Participant demographic information.

Participant	Gender	Age	Length of Pet Ownership	Animal Type	Pet Owner at the Time of Interview
Jim	Male	64	15 years	Dog	No
Elliott	Male	36	8 years	Dog	Yes
Tom	Male	39	7 years	Dog	Yes

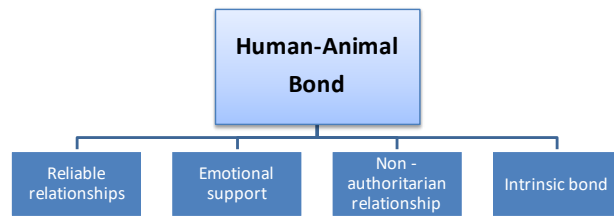


Figure 1. Theme and superordinate themes.

Superordinate Theme: “Reliable Relationships.” All three participants discussed the reliable nature of their pet dogs. For two participants, Elliott and Tom, this was discussed in contrast to the breakdown of previous human relationships and family communication.

Elliott: “Dogs are your best friends. . . . No matter who lets you down, human wise, dogs are always there for you.” (p. 6)

“Even girlfriends come and go, but [dog’s name] is always there for me.” (p. 9)

Jim also spoke about the reliable nature of his pet dog in relation to them both living on the streets; he described his dog as “*always, erh . . . awake, alert*” (p. 6). The reliable nature of the dog was a valued characteristic for all three participants. Such characteristics were seemingly viewed by Elliott and Tom to be absent from their experience of human relationships. Due to the breakdown of previous relationships, participants may have attached added meaning to their relationship with their dogs.

Superordinate Theme: “Emotional Support.” The dependable relationship formed between the participants and their dogs allowed the availability of emotional support. Participants were asked whether owning a pet had influenced their experience of homelessness in any way. Two directly linked this question to the emotional support their pets provided: “*Companionship, that’s a big one*” (Tom, p. 4). Elliott appreciated the closeness of his dog during times of loneliness: “*I’m glad you’re [his dog] with me, cuz there’s no one else around*” (p. 9). Despite accessing homelessness services with staff available to support

him emotionally, Tom still referred to his need to have his dog with him to talk through how he was feeling on the morning of the interview. The emotional link with each of the participants suggests that pet ownership was a personally meaningful activity that provided psychological benefits.

Subordinate Theme: “Nonauthoritarian Relationship.” For all participants, the relationship with their dogs was formed out of mutual respect, going beyond the typical “master and his animal” relationship. Tom was asked whether he viewed his pet ownership as a clear role for himself and replied:

“I don’t class myself as her dad, owner or anything, no we’re just mates. She can bugger off whenever she wants, but she won’t go nowhere.” (p. 5)

Evolving from being an “owner,” Tom’s views of his dog could be interpreted in a more meaningful way. Similar to the emotions attached to friendship, Tom has a working relationship with his dog that does not have strict boundaries. As with human relationships, he seemingly values and respects his dog’s wishes and does not command authority over the relationship. It may also be suggested that Tom feels comfortable with this form of relationship as he is confident his dog will not leave him. This was equally mentioned by Jim, who stated that his dog “*never went anywhere*” (p. 5) when living on the streets. This mutual need for one another was highlighted by Tom during a time of separation from his dog:

“She got stolen a little while back, I was away from her for four days and I was just lost, completely lost. She came back to me with no fur on her . . . she gets separation anxiety.” (p. 3)

Exhibiting similar behavior when separated, this suggests that Tom may perceive a shared emotional connection with his dog.

Subordinate Theme: “Intrinsic Bond.” The language used throughout the interviews with two participants reflected the perceived family bond

they had with their dogs. Jim did not use descriptive words when talking about his pet and referred to his dog as “she.” Elliott used lineage-based wording to describe the relationship with his dog: “*I don’t have any kids . . . yeah so she is my little daughter*” (p. 7) and also referred to himself as “Daddy.” Strongly referenced also by Tom, he spoke about the instant love he had for his dog when they first met and the need to be around each other:

“I just fell in love with her and we just had that bond instantly like that and we’ve been together ever since.” (p. 2)

The language used seemed to echo potential feelings between parents and child and emphasizes the intrinsic bond. Tom also felt that he was intrinsically bound with his pet by stating “she’s me, she’s me” (p. 8). From this quote, Tom seemingly emphasizes feelings of closeness between him and his dog and may identify himself as one with his dog.

Discussion

Within this discussion of findings, the key theme of the meaning of the *human-animal bond* is explored from the perspective of three individuals who have experienced pet ownership and homelessness. The findings of the research and the discussion are presented separately to ensure that findings from the participants, including direct quotes, were not lost in the discussion of other literature and theory (Roberts, 2010). The researcher has included both convergence and divergence within themes from the findings in the discussion to address the refined research question: What is the meaning of pet ownership from the perspective of people who are homeless?

To address this research question, this discussion explores two main areas that evolved from the participants’ experiences: emotional well-being and valued relationships. Implications for providers of homeless accommodation, a critique of the research, and areas for future research are also addressed. The master theme of *human-animal bond* sheds light on the phenomenon of pet ownership by people who are

homeless by highlighting the enhanced emotional well-being and value the relationship can have for individuals.

Emotional Well-Being

The activity of pet ownership influenced the emotional well-being of the participants positively. This was predominantly referenced by two of the participants, Elliott and Tom. Although the same level of detail was not provided by Jim, throughout the interview he repeatedly spoke about the loss of his dog and his perceived need to look after her correctly. Throughout the interviews it was evidenced that pet ownership was a determinant of the participant’s emotional well-being. For example, Tom spoke about the need to talk through his problems with his dog on a daily basis, and Elliott expressed feelings of distress when separated from his dog.

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), humans need to complete fundamental and basic needs before achieving self-actualization—the realization of personal self. The first lower level stages that need to be satisfied include productive activities such as the provision of food, water, and shelter. The hierarchical pyramid states that these needs must be fulfilled before moving to the next level (Maslow, 1943). The intimate relationship with their pets suggests a prioritization of psychological needs including belongingness and love before their basic human needs that highlights the bond between the human and animal.

The emotional meaning of pet ownership is evidenced and acknowledged among a variety of different populations outside homeless-related research. Such findings have similarities and differences among individuals who are homeless. Animals have been adopted as a coping resource for loneliness and low mood (Black, 2012; Krause-Parello, 2012; Von Bergen, 2015). Homelessness has been described as a time of loneliness (Perron et al., 2014). Pet ownership has also been adopted as a coping mechanism among individuals experiencing homelessness (Rew, 2000). Although participants did not directly allude to feeling lonely, both Elliott and Tom favored their

relationship with their pets over human interaction. The potential deleterious effects of individuals choosing pets over human relationships is evidenced by Stallones et al. (1990), who demonstrated that individuals who scored highly on pet attachment indices had fewer social networks around them. Participants explained human relationships as unreliable and untrustworthy, while respecting the reliable nature of their companion animals. This resonates with findings from Slatter, Lloyd, and King (2012) and Howe and Easterbrook (2018), who evidenced pet ownership as mitigating a sense of isolation from other meaningful relationships for individuals experiencing homelessness. This is in contrast to existing literature, with pet ownership evidenced as a facilitator for increased social interactions with other people for individuals experiencing homelessness (Taylor et al., 2004).

Valued Relationship

In line with the methodology used, the language and metaphors used by the participants were analyzed. Both Elliott and Tom referred to their pets with terms of endearment. At several points Elliott included the words “daddy” and “daughter” to describe his and his dog’s roles. This demonstrated the value of the pets owned by the participants and resembles feelings exhibited between parents and children. The attribution of human characteristics and behaviors to animals are common characteristics of humans (Davies, 2010), with pets loved and idolized as family members (Fraser & Taylor, 2016). Affinities with pets are often understood in terms of kinship and are valued because of the animal’s differences as well as similarities to humans (Charles, 2014; Cohen, 2002). This has been evidenced in relation to feelings of loneliness, with individuals more inclined to anthropomorphize their pets when experiencing deficits in psychological needs (Epley et al., 2008). Tom viewed himself in a different way. Rather than a relationship involving hierarchical differences, Tom’s relationship was more mutual in nature; he disagreed with the role “pet owner” and preferred the term “friend.” Stating “she’s me, she’s me,” Tom’s bond with his dog was interpreted as being intrinsically

bound. Distinctively viewing himself as one with his pet, he discussed separation from his animal in terms of emotional distress. The mutual relationship was also demonstrated in the parallel feelings of sadness when Tom and his dog were separated. Existing literature states that pets can have a modulating role for attachment insecurities (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011), reaffirming the need to look at pet ownership for individuals who are homeless as a psychological need.

Although the homeless association involved with recruitment of participants allowed a certain number of pets, homeless accommodation providers who prohibit access to support because of pet ownership must be recognized as a progressive barrier for homeless individuals (Baker, 2001). The importance of the relationship between a person who is homeless and their pet should not be underestimated due to the impact on the individual’s emotional well-being. Concerns around the health and safety of animals in shelters could be combated with practical strategies including greater links with animal charities for temporary shelter for pets or for pet-friendly areas within hostel accommodation.

Limitations of Research

As with any research there are potential limitations. It is acknowledged that preconceptions are brought by the researcher when completing data analysis in IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). However, findings from this study have been firmly rooted in the evidence of the words of the participants (Pringle et al., 2011), and reflexive discussions with the third author enhanced the quality of this research.

The specific qualities of the participants (all male, all owned a dog, all accessed the same homeless association in the same area) may inhibit wider application. However, participant details are presented to allow the reader to make an informed decision as to whether findings may be transferable to other contexts, with commonalities across accounts leading to useful insights (Reid et al., 2005). Future research could explore a more culturally and geographically varied sample. Also, specific research from the

viewpoint of females would add a more rounded picture, along with the need to explore the meaning of pet ownership with a range of pets. There is also scope to encourage service providers to review current policies regarding the inclusion of pets in homelessness services, along with the importance of companion animals in the provision of all social services.

Summary for Practitioners

This research explored pet ownership from the unique perspective of individuals who had experienced homelessness. The experience of being homeless can have a negative impact on a person’s physical and mental health. For many people who are homeless, having a pet is an important and valued activity. Studies estimate pet owners as somewhere between 10% and 24% of the total homeless population. Despite this, many homelessness services and accommodation providers do not offer places to persons with pets.

The focus of this in-depth qualitative study was to explore the meaning of pet ownership from the perspective of individuals who were or have experienced homelessness. Using a semistructured format, the researchers interviewed three men who had all accessed support from homeless services. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to explore the meaning of pet ownership.

The master theme of *human-animal bond* emerged from the analysis and encompassed the unique bond participants had with their pets. There were four subordinate themes of pet ownership for individuals who experienced homelessness: a reliable relationship, the provision of emotional support, a nonauthoritarian relationship, and an intrinsic bond that developed between the pet and the individual.

Exploration and interpretation of the meaning of pet ownership highlighted that emotional well-being was enhanced and the relationship between the individual and their pet was highly valued. Although participants did not directly allude to feeling lonely, there was a favoring of their relationship with their pet over human interaction. They reported human

relationships as being unreliable and untrustworthy, in contrast to the reliable nature of their companion animals. Rather than a relationship involving hierarchical differences, one participant described the relationship as mutual in nature. He disagreed with the role of “pet owner” and preferred the term “friend,” stating “she’s me, she’s me.” The bond with his dog was interpreted as being intrinsically bound. Separation from his animal was discussed in terms of emotional distress as he distinctively viewed himself as one with his pet. The psychological benefits of pet ownership for people who are homeless can modulate some of the negative consequences of the homelessness experience.

Despite the benefits associated with pet ownership, many homelessness service providers do not offer services to persons with pets. If pet ownership is a barrier to persons needing services and consequently reduces access to support to leave homelessness, there is a need for service providers to reconsider their policies. Organizations would benefit from the development of practical strategies to enable individuals to keep their pets close by, in order to facilitate the continuation of positive relationships and the emotional well-being of the pet owners using their services. This could be enhanced through partnerships with veterinary services to support the welfare of the animals, and there are a number of charitable organizations in the United Kingdom who have taken up this challenge in recent years, for example Street Vet, Street Paws, and Dogs on the Streets. In addition, the value of pet ownership could be harnessed in support interventions to help individuals leave homelessness.

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